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Response to Ali - 2

Mark Davis

Macalester College

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Response

Mark Davis

It is a pleasure to participate in this year's Roundtable, and I thank Professor Samatar for inviting me. I'd also like to salute Mr. Tariq Ali for coming to Macalester and participating in this event. Before I begin my remarks, I'd like to applaud Professor Samatar for inviting three keynote speakers with such diverse perspectives, all of whom are knowledgeable and articulate advocates of their positions. Nothing can promote sound reflection more than having one's views challenged by an informed opponent.

I very much appreciated Mr. Ali's effort to put current U.S. policy into an historical perspective. I agree that American foreign policy has too often been shortsighted and misdirected. An inconsistent Middle East policy, in which some countries are allies one year and enemies the next, has undermined America's credibility in the Arab world. I also appreciated Ali's thoughtful discussion on the nature and origins of the current enmity between America and many Arab and Middle Eastern countries. I do, however, have reservations about some of Ali's comments.

With particularly provocative language and images, Ali seems to suggest that the women of Afghanistan would be just as well off, perhaps even better off, had the U.S. never invaded and occupied that country. Under the rule of the Taliban, however, women were harshly oppressed. Girls were not allowed to attend school, women's choices and opportunities in the society were severely limited, and many women were the victims of brutal retributions. Is life wonderful for girls and women in Afghanistan today? Of course it is not. Yet millions of Afghani women and girls have returned to work and school, and, according to a recent U.N. report, over 40% of the newly registered voters in Afghanistan are women. Certainly, these are only first steps, but they are real and very important steps. Ignoring these and reporting only on despicable pornography and prison abuse as a way of characterizing the current lives of Afghani (and Iraqi) women misrepresents the facts.

The combination of what Ali chose to present, how he chose to present it, and what he chose *not* to present, reminded me that he is a talented playwright and author, adept at shaping an audience's responses through the use of evocative images and provocative language. Such

manipulations are appropriate and effective in a novel or on stage, and they can generate much enthusiasm when one is speaking to a like-minded audience. Today, however, I would have liked to hear more acknowledgment of the complexities and ambiguities of some difficult issues, and more attention to alternative paths America might pursue, along with the consequences of such paths.

I couldn't agree more with Ali's plea that we "eschew political agendas" in our effort to understand recent history in the Arab world. However, it seemed to me that Ali's presentation was fueled by political ideology. Ali only briefly alludes to the responsibility of Arab leaders in contributing to the unrest in their streets and the hearts of their people. The repressive regimes in countries such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria, have severely hindered economic growth in those countries; obstructed productive research in the fields of science, health, and technology; and trampled the creative potential of generations. Not being a political scientist, I am not certain what Ali means by an American model of social reform. I do know that people from different cultures share common passions and dreams that transcend differences in religion and culture. In Western and Islamic countries today, people dream of becoming artists, scientists, athletes, teachers, writers, engineers, and doctors. I believe that the majority of Iraqis and other inhabitants of the Middle East, male and female, would prefer to possess the freedoms of expression, religion, and other rights that we enjoy in America, including the rights to pursue our dreams and to hold our leaders accountable through free elections. If this is an American model of social reform, then I do not agree with Ali's conclusion that this model simply won't work in the Arab world. I believe most Arab citizens would eagerly and passionately embrace it, if ever given the chance.

The key question in this Roundtable is what should be America's role in the world today? Ali indicts the United States for embarking on an imperialistic path, which, he asserts, is rooted in our "intellectual and historical amnesia," a malady apparently peculiar to America, since outside the U.S., "the echoes of history have never ceased to resonate." I do not agree that the rest of this world is as innocent on the issue of

historical amnesia as Ali wants us to believe. In my opinion, no country comes off looking very good these days.

The United States is being criticized for its unilateral activities by the governments of France, Germany, Russia, and most Arab countries, when these governments seem to have largely chosen to relinquish to America any moral responsibility of intervention. As far as I am aware, there were no efforts from the Arab world that were directed at Saddam Hussein's removal. Ongoing U.N. investigations into the corruption of its Oil for Food program are looking into accusations that significant "monetary agreements" were in play between Iraq and France, Germany, and Russia, possibly amounting to billions of dollars per year. If true, this raises serious questions as to some of the motivations guiding the foreign policies of these countries prior to the war. In any event, France and Germany demonstrated a lack of moral leadership and commitment during the Balkan crisis, when they were unable and unwilling to take any decisive steps to stop the escalating ethnic fighting and killing, thus leaving it up to the United States to take the lead. "Never Again!": I thought this was the lesson the world was supposed to have learned from World War II and the Holocaust. There is something sadly ironic about a surrender of moral responsibility by countries like Germany and France. It is difficult to imagine a greater and more unfortunate example of historical amnesia than that.

The concern that America is embarking on a policy of empire building stems from two factors, only one of which is usually acknowledged. The first, the one usually emphasized, is the undeniable trend in recent years for the United States to make certain decisions and policy on a unilateral basis. The second factor, not usually mentioned, is the persistent unwillingness by other countries, and by multinational organizations such as the United Nations, to intercede forcefully and decisively in times of human crisis. Roméo Dallaire, Commander of the United Nations forces in Rwanda during the genocide ten years ago, sees the same lack of international concern over the genocide currently taking place in the Darfur region of Sudan as he saw in Rwanda in 1994. In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Dallaire blasts the international community for its indifference and lack of will to intercede in a meaningful way in Sudan, doing little more than passing more resolutions and pledges.

How should the United States respond to this situation? I strongly believe that the United States needs to resume participating in a more multilateral fashion in areas such as trade and the environment. The

more difficult question is what the U.S. should do if other countries and multinational organizations continue to relinquish the moral responsibility of interceding forcefully and effectively when human suffering calls for it.

Unfortunately, because one may view parts of America's foreign policy as morally questionable, it is easy to direct one's anger at the U.S. and the current administration. However, this can become a moral "cop-out" if one becomes so preoccupied with criticizing U.S. policy that one largely relegates the suffering of thousands and millions of people to the sidelines in the argument. Most Americans cannot comprehend the utter brutality and depravity that so many of our fellow humans are forced to experience in the world today. We can only get glimpses of this horror through books and other first-person accounts. As an illustration, I urge you to pick up the book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, by Azar Nafisi. Reading it, one doesn't know whether to laugh or cry as the author describes the tragic absurdity and irrelevance of life, and of life lost, for women (and men) living under a totalitarian regime.

This is where I'd like to take the discussion. For a moment, forget the current administration's foreign policy. Forget Iraq. The slate is clean. Now to the really hard question: Empire builder or not, the U.S. is the world's only superpower; as such, what should America's moral obligation be to people suffering in failed and failing states throughout the world?

Do we have any moral obligation at all? Are our critics correct when they characterize our humanitarian inclinations as paternalistic, dismissing us as liberal imperialists? In fact, do we have any right to intercede, even if the purpose is to relieve widespread human suffering? Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, international law has affirmed the sovereign status of nations, namely, that nations should be free of outside intervention. But to what extent does, or should, this sovereignty protection apply to totalitarian dictators, those who assume and maintain their power through murderous repression? In addition to affirming national sovereignty, should international law also affirm the rights of people to be free of repressive totalitarian rule? If people are suffering under a dictatorial regime, does the rest of the international community have a moral obligation to intercede? I believe the international community has a moral obligation to address these questions, and to answer them with as little ambiguity as possible, and the sooner the better.

With respect to its responsibilities to people suffering in failed and failing states, America basically has three options: it can act unilaterally, it can act multilaterally, or it can decide not to act at all. I believe that truly multinational interventions, involving coordinated forces from most of the world's major powers, could dramatically reduce the frequency of failed states and the massive loss of lives and human potential that make up these tragedies. However, the past ten years have shown little evidence that much of the international community possesses the desire or will to participate in such an effort. Nor is there any reason to believe that this attitude is going to change any time soon. What if a multilateral approach means protracted negotiations, with little prospect that any effective intervention will ever actually take place? Under these conditions, endorsing multilateralism is a little like endorsing sweetness and light, or peace and love. It has a noble ring, but what if endorsements "ain't gonna make it happen"? What's the moral person, or nation, to do then?

Should the U.S. simply go ahead and proceed unilaterally? As shown in Iraq, this doesn't work well, if at all, in many cases. Should the U.S. do nothing? In many ways, adopting a *laissez-faire* approach in response to failed and failing states is an enticing option: no American lives lost and lots of money saved. We can then lament over the human suffering, regretting that international law forbids our intervention. Whenever I try to imagine this non-response, I am chilled by the prospect that sometime in the future we will realize that we did *forget*, that we were witness to human suffering on a massive scale and we turned our heads, perhaps assuaging our guilt by telling ourselves that we were just waiting until we could get broad international support.

In summary, what are America's options when the world is confronted with brutal dictators, dictator "wannabees," and the associated human suffering occurring on a massive scale? Multilateral intervention—a good concept but not realistic right now. Unilateral intervention—perhaps realistic in some cases, but a bad concept. *Laissez-faire*—alluring, but ultimately morally indefensible, and, as Niall Ferguson warned, this may lead to the worst situation of all, apolarity. In the best of all possible worlds, multilateral intervention is the obvious choice. But, if effective multilateral response is little more than a pipe dream, then America is left with two bad choices. From a moral perspective, it is

difficult to see how one can advocate an isolationist approach. Unfortunately, this leaves the arrow pointing to unilateralism. I don't like that choice but, from a moral perspective, is it sometimes the best of the bad options?

I recognize that we "liberal imperialists" must be careful not to delude ourselves into believing our humanitarian efforts can realize some utopian vision. However, I vigorously resist and resent the notion that even sincere efforts by Americans to intercede for humanitarian purposes are really nothing more than self-righteous, paternalistic, and self-serving overtures.

The time is now for new ideas that can shed light on the issue of whether America has any moral responsibility with respect to failed and failing states and to the people suffering and dying in them. If so, what can it do to fulfill this responsibility?